

A Dog a Day

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Published in InsideOutside Magazine, 2006

In a town that breeds and trains professional athletes, sometimes one can feel inferior if they neglect to wake up on a Saturday morning and go for a half marathon trail run, a pedal to Molas Pass or adventure down the Animas in a kayak. Don't misunderstand me; I myself enjoy the paradoxical pain and pleasure coupled with the endorphin blast proceeding physical adventures. But my question remains, for how long can our bodies sustain and perform the physical demands of our workouts? At what point do small aches and pains grow exponentially in our body? When do we listen to our bodies as they inform us that our muscles have tightened to the point of injury? Do we accept knee and hip replacements, never-ending hamstring tightness or chronic neck and shoulder pain? Yoga is one form of movement that can help us gracefully approach and understand our physical human form.

I might be on financial par with Bill Gates, if every person handed me a dime each time they looked at me with guilt in their eyes, like performing an unnecessary confessional and remarked, "I know I should stretch". Indeed, it is evident that the human body intuitively knows it should stretch as it performs this simple act each morning before arising out of bed without much thought or discipline. Our muscles strive to lengthen and our vertebrae scream for space after braving the forces of gravity each day.

Yoga is not a fad; it is a science that is recognized all over the world, reestablishing its credibility as an ancient discipline dating back ten thousand years ago. Merit is being given to a practice that has continued to help people realize their physical, emotional and spiritual potential. Yoga disciplines both the physical body and the mind, bringing the two into union and encourages strength, flexibility and suppleness into all parts. Yoga is a perfect mind and body discipline for athletes providing a deep understanding of the body while learning to focus and calm the mind in order to maintain postures (asanas). Not only can yoga enhance one's athletic performance through increased agility, flexibility, and lung efficiency but regular yoga practice helps the body quickly rebound and repair from injuries, strains and sprains.

So why do we intuitively know we should stretch but we don't? We are creatures of habit, having structure to our lives and assumptions about health. Meaning, if we don't include stretching or yoga into our daily routine, the self-discipline to do so can be a difficult task. In our culture, we have come to accept that "pain is gain", that we have to apex to a place of exhaustion before giving ourselves a break. Simply compare the average work hours and vacation time allotted in the United States to that of any European country. Consequently, when we workout we want to sweat, feel our muscles ache, and "get our monies" worth per se. It would be advantageous to balance our thinking in regards to our health, by combining isometric and isotonic motion (working muscles and then lengthening them) and blending cardiovascular exercise with deep breathing.

Each day another new student walks into my yoga class, the stiffest of which tends to be runners, bikers and people whose professions or lifestyles keep them stagnant for long durations. If you relate, you might be asking yourself, “Where should I start, I can barely touch my toes?” Start slowly and gently. Yoga is not a future focused, mental notion that your body must immediately change, but rather yoga asks one to think in the now by meeting the body right where it is. The result of this philosophical change in understanding is what makes yoga accessible for everyone.

Give a simple yoga posture a chance. Downward Facing Dog (Adho Muka Shavanasana) is an excellent starting point. “A dog a day” can tremendously help the typically overstrained muscles of a Durango athlete.

Begin on all fours, shoulders on top of hands, all ten fingers spread wide with knees and feet about a foot apart. Turn toes under and push back into an upside-down V position. Hands and feet should be parallel, approximately one foot apart and spread evenly into the floor. Gaze towards the navel, while keeping the head and shoulders relaxed. If you have tight hamstrings, bend your legs slightly so the spine elongates and your weight shifts away from the wrists towards the center. Maintain the posture while breathing in and out through the nose for at least five full breaths. If your heels don't touch the ground, don't fret! Initially they will most likely be a few inches away from the floor, especially runners.

This asana strengthens weak and injured knees by alternately stretching and contracting the hamstrings and quadriceps as well as the calf and shin muscles, the muscles that hold the knees in alignment. Downward dog creates necessary space between the vertebrae, lengthens the torso, stretches and strengthens the achilles tendons and ankles, cohesively correcting muscular imbalances.

Thankfully, there are a plethora of venues in town in which to receive quality yoga instruction. Wisdom is gained when we start to think of yoga as an integral part of our health insurance policy. But take heed, yoga is patience, it is longevity, and it is a commitment that requires long-term thinking all values that often take a back seat in the face of our warp speed, competitive country.